Precarious Lives:
Identity, Agency, and Uncertainty in the Transition to Adulthood

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Over the past few decades, there has been a steady increase in age of first marriage, completion of education, parenthood, and achievement of steady full-time employment (Arnett 2000; Blatterer 2010; Côté et al. 1996). These life transitions have been considered to comprise a standard benchmark of adulthood since roughly the 1940s, as the affluence created in the decades following the Second World War allowed the majority of Americans to emulate this model. Highly standardized lives, stability, and security became the classic markers of adulthood during the "Golden Age," (Cherlin 2014), leading to the current association in the popular imagination between adulthood and stability.

A new field of research has developed in the last couple of decades, focusing on the changes that have occurred in relation to how and when youth reach adulthood. Much of the literature on the changing transition to adulthood follows the concept of "emerging adulthood" developed by the psychologist Jeffery Arnett. Emerging adulthood, as conceptualized by Arnett and others, is characterized as a period in which youth feel as though they have moved beyond adolescence but have yet to fully transition into adulthood. It is a time for youth to develop their identities, explore different life paths, and focus on themselves (Arnett 1997, 2000, 2004, 2007). Although Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood highlighted the greater uncertainty about life trajectory and fluidity of identity experienced by young adults, the concept itself did not imply a heightened precariousness in life or even a lessor likelihood that stability and security in life circumstances and in the achievement of identity would be achieved by most adults eventually. One of the central aims of our study, however, is to challenge this assumption and to provide a sociological reframing of Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood.

We do not question the notion that the transition to adulthood has changed significantly over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries in the United States. In the middle of the 20th century, it was quite common for what have come to be called the "traditional markers of adulthood" to be achieved very rapidly after the completion of education. With the availability of high-paying, stable, working class jobs, it was possible for working class men and women to achieve financial independence, marry, own homes, have children and establish a comfortable middle class lifestyle soon after completing high school. With the expansion of higher education and the proliferation of high-paying, stable white collar jobs, it was possible for middle class men and women to do the same following the completion of college. Whether working class or middle class, most people appeared to be full-fledged adults by their early 20s. And the lives they established in their early 20s were, for the most part, the lives they would lead until they retired in their middle to late 60s. How they felt about their lives, either then as they entered adulthood or now as they watch their children and/or grandchildren transition to adulthood differently than they had, is not well known. This is a question we hope to address in a later phase of our research when we interview older adults about their own life experiences and their understandings of how these differ from those of their children and grandchildren.

If we use as a basis for comparison the modal transition to adulthood experienced by middle and working class Americans who came of age in the very short period from about 1945

through about 1970, then we could say that there is very strong evidence to conclude that the lives of middle and working class Americans who are coming of age now and have come of age in the most recent decades of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are more precarious and uncertain. It may also be possible to say, although far more ambiguously, that the lives of people who have come of age in the later part of the 20th century and in the early 21st century are characterized by a wider range of choice and increased fluidity as people construct (and reconstruct) their lives and their self-identities. We argue, however, that the greater precariousness and uncertainty is not merely caused by a delay in the achievement of traditional markers of adulthood but rather is very much caused by changes in the structure of society that have longer-term implications for today's 20-somethings and have broader implications for older adults as well.

Social theories of identity and social change have analyzed how identities, life trajectories, and experiences of agency and certainty are shaped by the conditions of the late modern era. Scholars such as Bauman, Giddens, Beck and many others have provided insightful contributions to the study of modern identities. There is not, however, a substantial literature on qualitative studies that substantiate, qualify, or help to refine these theories. One of the aims of our study is to contribute to this project.\

Additionally, there has been limited research conducted on the ways in which transitions to adulthood differ for youth from different backgrounds, and much of the adulthood literature has been formed on the basis of the theory of "emerging adulthood." It has been well documented, however, that children from wealthier families receive significantly more financial, emotional, and intellectual assistance from parents than those from lower-income families (Lareau 2002; Padilla-Walker et al. 2011), having a serious impact on young people's ability to navigate the path to adolescence and adulthood. Having conducted interviews with 156 youth from various racial, ethnic, class, and age ranges, we hope to provide empirical data that speak to the theoretical contributions of identity scholars, as well as speak to the literature on current transitions to adulthood. As young people are just beginning to launch themselves into society as full-fledged citizens, young people are experiencing the effects of late modernity to a different—arguably more potent—degree than the rest of society. The goal of our research is to understand how the process of transitioning to adulthood is affected by the conditions of late modernity, as well as how variations in social class, race, ethnicity, nationality/immigration status, and/or gender affect this transition.

ADULTHOOD AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Similar to the way in which the concept of childhood has developed and changed over time, so too has the concept of adulthood. The concept of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are culturally constructed, differing by one's class, geographical region, and the time period in which one lives (Aries 1962; Mintz 2015). In comparison with past generations, it has become increasingly difficult to determine when adolescence ends and adulthood begins (Hendry et al. 2007). Demographic transitions that traditionally marked the transition to adulthood—such as finishing one's education, attaining full-time employment, achieving financial and residential stability, marrying, and having children—have been postponed. For example, in 1970 the median age of first marriage in the United States was 21 for women and 23 for men. By 2015, it was 27 for women and 29 for men (The United States Census Bureau 2015). The number of young people enrolled in higher education has also dramatically increased, from 14% in 1940 to

over 60% in the mid-1990s (Arnett 2000). Given these changes, Arnett argues that these role transitions are no longer very salient in young people's conceptions of what it means to be an adult.

Arnett (1997) describes the transition to adulthood as a process through which individuals decide for themselves when they become adults. It is no longer the case that others grant the status of "adult" to individuals at a specific moment, through occasions or rites of passage that mark one's transition. Instead, "adulthood" is achieved subjectively and psychologically (Arnett 1997, 2000, 2007) without any outside influence. However, the ways that young people understand adulthood may not be how they actually experience adulthood. Sociologists, for example, have argued that structural and environmental factors such as race, social class, ethnicity, and family structure significantly influence the transition to adulthood as well as conceptions of adulthood (Bynner 2005; Silva 2013). For example, among youth growing up in poverty, lower levels of identity development have been noted, which lead to outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, delinquency, and poor academic achievement (Phillips & Pittman 2003). The role of family obligation and cohesion is also more frequent across minority racial and ethnic groups, who value interdependence with as well as independence from family (Syed & Mitchell 2013) The ideologies that young people develop in regards to their status as adults is highly dependent upon their ability to attain the characteristics that society deems worthy of respect, dignity, and recognition. Whether or not youth see themselves as adults is largely influenced by the respect and recognition that they receive from others, even if they do not perceive it as such (Blatterer 2005, 2007, 2010; King 2012; Silva 2013). While individuals may often cite psychological factors such as cognitive maturity and responsibility in their definitions of adulthood, these authors argue, the limitations that are placed on individuals' ability to "become" adults are not equally distributed. As a result, there are many different ways that youth transition to and conceptualize of adulthood depending on a number of external circumstances; however, youth in the U.S. are likely to frame these experiences in psychological and individualistic terms.

LIQUID IDENTITIES

Foucault focused on the self that emerged from the complex set of social changes that produced *modernity*: the emergent modern self was the historically-specific product of institutions and discourses aimed primarily at producing a highly disciplined, self-monitoring subjectivity. But, according to some social theorists, the social changes of the twentieth century have produced a new kind of self that has supplanted this disciplined subjectivity. Theories of postmodern selves (for example, Kellner 1989, Baudrillard 1990a, Baudrillard 1990b, Jameson 1991, Baudrillard 1994, Turkle 1995, Sennett 1998, Bauman 2001) portray selves as far less orderly, fragmented, "deep," and stable than those analyzed by Foucault as characteristic of the modern era. According to Elliot (2001), postmodern theories of the self have three core aspects: (1) an emphasis on fragmentation of the self; (2) "a narcissistic preoccupation with appearance, image, and style"; and (3) an elevation of value of dream, hallucination, and madness "at the expense of common stocks of knowledge or rationality" (Elliot 2001:136). These postmodern theories differ in whether they see the self as narcotized and largely obliterated or fraught with anxiety about its fragility and transience.

Many analysts of this emergent form of self stress the ways in which the new cultural order enervates people and renders their selves thin, vague, and insubstantial (Baudrillard 1990a, 1990b, Jameson 1991, Baudrillard 1994, Baudrillard 2007). For example, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard argues that selves are diminished by the elaborate "hyperreal" social environment created by the late twentieth-century's explosion of media" intoxicating, prepossessing, and rapidly shifting images become more powerful realities than the immediate physical and social environment. Seduced and bedazzled by these images and their simulated worlds, people lack motivation and means to sustain either the disciplined self-described by Foucault or the thoughtful self-proposed by the Enlightenment ideal. In the postmodern era, as the rapid transmission of sounds and images intensifies, the self becomes a shallow spectator. People consume the endless sounds and images of mass culture with a blasé attitude (*pace* Simmel) only slightly tempered by pleasurable moments that fail to add up to any lasting pleasure. Adorno's worst fears for the impact of "the culture industry" on the self have been exceeded: not only is there no impetus for social change, but there is no longer much impetus even for the construction of individual identity.

In contrast to theories like Baudrillard's, that stress how postmodernity enervates or obliterates the self, other theorists of postmodern (or late modern) individualization—Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, and Zygmunt Bauman—observe a postmodern self that retains sufficient integrity and energy to be tormented, anxious, and confused—and, for at least a few observers, to sometimes thrive in this hyper-changing world.

Giddens (1991, 1992, 2000) argues that the late modern era requires that the self become a "reflexive project" that is provisional, improvisational, and unmoored from tradition. When de-traditionalization extended from the public sphere to the private sphere of self, intimacy, and everyday life, the last bit of solid social ground fell away: people were forced to live reflectively—strategically, thoughtfully, anxiously—in all spheres of life. The self must now be under constant revision as new lifestyle choices emerge and former ones become less viable. The threat of failure and meaninglessness looms behind this reflexive project: people lack guidance and validation for the lives they lead and the selves they fashion (Giddens 1991:32). Anxiety and uncertainty can overwhelm reflexivity and revision and, Giddens argues, "the dark side of decision making is the rise of addictions and compulsions. Addiction comes into play when choice, which should be driven by autonomy, is subverted by anxiety" (Giddens 2000:64-5). Although his work concedes the pitfalls of self-reflexivity, Giddens offers a largely optimistic portrayal of the increased possibilities for freedom and choice provided through the project of identity in the late modern age: the reflexive self has a level of autonomy and rationality that fulfills some of the Enlightenment's promises, bringing the rewards of self-mastery and self-authorship to its creator.

Although their analysis of the implications of de-traditionalization for self and identity is similar to Giddens', Beck and Beck-Gernsheim depart form him in their emphasis on its darker consequences. They focus on the precarious identities constructed in the context of an institutionalized individualization imposed by the disintegration of social categories and forms of social integration such as class, social status, gender, family, and neighborhood.

> Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage-manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it, and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while

> constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system, the welfare state, etc.
>
> (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:4)

Individualization has several pernicious consequences. The task of "stage managing" a biography is an anxious one. "The normal biography thus becomes the 'elective biography,' the 'reflexive biography,' the 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:3). While offering the possibility of mastery, the do-it-yourself biography can easily fail as a project—especially for those with limited resources to successfully navigate the treacherous waters of rapid social change. Additionally, this do-it-yourself biography must be constructed under relentlessly stressful daily circumstances. Ubiquitous social change makes everyday life uncertain. The security of daily routine vanishes, replaced by a "cloud of possibilities to be thought about and negotiated" (2002:6). "Think, calculate, plan, adjust, negotiate, define, revoke (with everything constantly starting again from the beginning): these are the imperatives of the 'precarious freedoms that are taking hold of life as modernity advances" (2002:6). In this world of uncertainty and anxiety, psychotherapies proliferate as individuals seek authorities to answer the question "Who and I and what do I want?" (2002:7). "God, nature, and the social system are being progressively replaced … by the individual—confused, astray, helpless, and at a loss" (2002:8).

Bauman similarly emphasizes the precariousness of identity in the late modern age: postmodernity or "liquid modernity" has more uncertainty, contingency, and ambivalence than the earlier modern period. Early modernity gave individuals the task of constructing identities through personal achievement, but they remained embedded in relatively well-defined social positions.

> The "self-identification" task put before men and women once the stiff frame of estates had been broken in the early modern era boiled down to the challenge of living "true to kind" ("keeping up with the Joneses"): of actively conforming to the established social types and models of conduct, of imitating, following the pattern, "acculturating," not falling out of step, not deviating from the norm.
>
> (Bauman 2001:145)

In the individualization of the contemporary era, though, "not just the individual *placements* in society, but the *places* to which individuals may gain access and in which they may wish to settle are melting fast and can hardly serve as targets for 'life projects'" (2001:146). The conditions of life in advanced modern societies, in Bauman's view, conspire "against distant goals, life-long projects, lasting commitments, eternal alliances, immutable identities" (Bauman 1996:51).

Bauman attributes much of the precariousness of identity to the precariousness of lives under global capitalism. Mirroring the late-twentieth century markets, postmodern social circumstances pressure individuals to maintain loose attachments to everything from institutions to identities. As the environment changes, the self must change. But the constant renovation of identity requires resources and, frequently, assistance from a range of experts. It provokes anxiety, even for those with the resources to manage it well, as they are haunted by "fears of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast-moving events, of being left behind … of

missing the moment that calls for a change of tack before crossing the point of no return" (Bauman 2001:47). Although the various fundamentalisms promise shelter from the struggle, it may be impossible to escape: even neo-traditionalists remain perpetually anxious about whether they have found an identity that is a haven from a mercilessly volatile environment.

The socially stratified nature of the individualization of the late modern age is a prominent theme in the debates about the heightened reflexivity of the contemporary period and criticisms of those who celebrate it (see Adams 2007 for a recent review). As Adams argues:

> The key proposition to be considered is whether or not the recent social changes … really do allow more people, more of the time, the power to transform their selves, via heightened reflexive self-awareness and what the specific social distribution and availability of this 'power' is, if it does exist.
>
> (Adams 2007:50)

Few deny heightened reflexivity in the lives of *some*, but the critics argue for a more differentiated analysis that examines how class, gender, race, and other social bases of social differentiation shape individuals' experience (cf., Lash 1994, Charlesworth 2000, McNay 2000, Adkins 2002, Devine 2005, Hey 2005, Skeggs 2005). An emerging consensus among social theorists is that the reflexive project of the post/late modern period is decisively shaped by systems of inequality.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

This research was conducted in South Florida, primarily in Boca Raton, from July 2016 to August 2016. The methodology used was semi-structured interviews, which on average lasted 60-90 minutes and were almost exclusively conducted face-to-face. A research team consisting of four people conducted interviews with a total of 156 adults from various racial, ethnic, class, nationality, and age ranges. With their permission, interviews were audio taped, and we are currently in the process of transcribing and coding interviews for themes, patters, and differences, using the qualitative analysis software *Atlas.ti*. The data presented here reflects the patterns that we have found in our sample so far.

The age of our participants ranged from age 18 to 57, with the age range of 21-24 comprising the bulk (48.7%) of our sample, followed by 18-20 (23.7%), 25-30 (17.9%), and about 9% who were 31 and older or who did not specify their age. The majority of our participants were current undergraduates at FAU. The racial composition of our sample comprised of 39% who identified as White/Caucasian (N=61), 22.4% as Black or African American (N=35), 19.2% as Hispanic American (N=30), 5% as Asian/Pacific Islander (N=8), and 14% as Multiple Ethnicity/Other (N=22). We had a significantly larger number of women (N=111) in our sample than men (N=45). The social class status of our participants is represented as 0.6% (N=1) lower class, 33.3% working-class (N=52), 23.7% lower-middle-class (N=37), 23.1% middle-class (N=36), 17.9% upper-middle-class (N=28), and 1.3% not sure/unspecified (N=2). Race/ethnicity and gender were self-identified by participants. Social class was calculated by the research team using current annual household income, highest level of education, parental occupation, annual household income while the participant was growing up, and parents' highest level of education. Our model for identifying social class was largely

based on the method used by Armstrong and Hamilton (2013: 31-35) in their study of universities' role in the reproduction of inequality.

In regards to demographics, our sample is not representative of the country in terms of race, gender, or age[1]. All of our participants also lived in the South Florida area, and as such it cannot speak to the specificity of experiences in different geographical regions. However, the goal of this research was not necessarily to obtain a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population. While our study cannot speak to the experience of the nation as a whole, it does contribute to the understanding of contemporary identity and the ways in which life experiences, transitions to adult life, and identity development differ across various demographic categories. Much of the empirical literature on identity and adulthood focuses on very narrow demographics of people, namely middle- to upper-middle class, white Americans, and little research has been done on the influence of race, ethnicity, gender, and/or immigration status on the issues we are studying. Thus, exploring the process of reaching adulthood with an emphasis on youth who are disadvantaged by their race, ethnicity, gender, and/or social class is an important contribution to understanding how a demographic of people who are—in terms of social policy—in need of the most support. Little empirical research has been done on this demographic of youth's perceptions of adulthood and how they construct their adult identities on a daily basis. Our methodology of using semi-structured, qualitative interviews, we also argue, speaks more directly and fully to the questions we are asking. Thus, in a way our sample and methodology provide an ideal (albeit small) representation of the people whose experiences have been neglected in the adulthood literature as well as a rare empirical contribution to theories of identity and late modernity.

NARRATIVES OF GROWING UP

"It's Not Just, 'Go Do This, And Then You'll Get This.' There's A Lot of Figuring Out."

One theme that was present in our data was the new challenge that youth experience in regards to deciding what they want to do with their lives and pursuing a career that is satisfying. While not all participants felt as though they had to deeply invest themselves in identity work, others were acutely aware of the process. One such case was Hallie, a twenty-six year-old working-class woman, who described what she saw as the hardest thing about growing up today:

> *"I feel like now, because of the emphasis on following your heart and really figuring out what it is that you want to do, it makes it a lot harder. It's not just 'go do this, and then you'll get this.' There's a lot of figuring out, there's a lot of analyzing. And all of that takes so much time. Like, only in the three or four years—however long it's been that I've been back—I've really been doing a lot of self-exploration and I'm really grateful to myself that I've taken the time and that*

[1] We have a much higher proportion of racial/ethnic minorities and more than two times as many woman as the national population. It is difficult to determine the representativeness of our sample in regards to social class, as the method of categorization for determining social class is very ambiguous.
The racial and ethnic distribution of our sample is also slightly different from the overall demographic of the university, particularly in the representation of whites; the university overall reports that 52% of the students identify as white, whereas 39% of the participants in our sample identified as white. We also had a slightly higher percentage of black or African American students, and a significant portion (14%) of our sample identified as multiple ethnicity/other whereas the university did not have an equivalent category but did reported 2% of the university who identify with two or more races.

I've finally realized that I needed to just see things for myself and get to know myself so I can figure out these other things. But it takes a lot of time and it takes a lot of, um, a lot of commitment to figure out what it really is that's going on inside your head, you know?"

The necessity of exploring who you are and deciding what you want to commit to is something that Hallie recognized as distinct about current youth's lives. She mentions that, in the past, there was a clear path to follow that did not require such self-analysis and reflection. Conversely, today a significant amount of time and effort must be spent to discover who one is before deciding what life path to pursue.

Hallie was an especially interesting case when considering her awareness of identity accomplishments in the form of figuring out "who you are," which were more typical of the middle- or upper-middle class youth in our sample. More advantaged youth, however, were not as likely to struggle to pursue these routes as Hallie did, as they are more likely to have resources, guidance, and encouragement to help them undertake the task of self-discovery. For example, Andrew, an 18-year-old, African American, upper-middle class college freshman, explained to me very concisely his goals and experiences of adulthood. His mother, a school principal, and his father, a police officer, have had the same jobs for his entire life. His life growing up—which he described to me as "normal"—was characterized as fun, family-oriented, and stable. He went to private school and played sports, and "always" knew he wanted to be a doctor. When asked about the hardest part of growing up today, he stated that managing your finances in the face of an endless range of "things to do and buy." He also felt that kids today have become much more disrespectful of their parents and take things for granted. With more than enough free time each day, he says that he does not feel like he needs anymore; if he did have more free time, it would simply be spent doing more of what he does now—hanging out with friends.

"My Parents Are Definitely Sacrificers."

Children of immigrants—or young people who immigrated from another country at a very young age—tended to have very similar stories that differed greatly from their American-born, more advantaged peers. Overall, they have experienced more struggles in their attempt to succeed in America for a number of reasons. However, the main influence seemed to be parents' lack of knowledge about the American school system, the culture, or the society in general. Usually from the time they were children, these young people often had to navigate a completely different culture than the one their parents were familiar with. Education was also a very important goal for parents who had immigrated from another country, as the reason they did so was often so that their children could be well educated and have a better life than they had. However, despite their good intentions, it was not that easy; their children would be "competing" with students who had parents that were well-versed in college applications and school bureaucracy, and the young people in our sample recounted many instances where they felt as if they did not receive adequate guidance. For example, Jessica, a twenty-four year old working-class Hispanic woman, described her experience with the school system in America:

"Even in high school, like, they had no idea. Like they don't know how the system here works. So… but it was just, that's what you have to do and I guess you do have to figure it out."

Mhm. So how did you figure it out when you were in high school?

[sighs]

Like did you have any mentorship or guidance from anyone at school or anything like that?

"No, nothing. And I think that's why it's taking me so long because, like, I'm 24 and I graduated high school in 2009, so it's been—it's been a while just for a bachelor's. And I think it's because I had to learn along the way; I didn't really have any guidance. I know in high school, like, when people are already applying their junior year, like I had no idea. So, it's like—I'm like, learning."

The type of experience described by Jessica was very common among students whose parents had immigrated from another (especially in the case of South America or the Caribbean) country, or who had immigrated themselves at a young age.

Being separated from family—and the emotional and relational difficulties that came with it—was another feature of immigrants' stories. Sherline, a twenty-two year old, working class, Haitian woman, described how difficult it was for her to leave her mother behind in Haiti to come to America and live with her father when she was seven years old:

"If you have the opportunity to leave the country, you will take it. So although my mom did not get a chance to leave and she saw that I was going to be able to leave, she wanted me to go because here in the U.S. you would have a better life. You wouldn't struggle as much as if you were in Haiti growing up being tougher than here, even though it means sacrificing growing up with her. […] I had a wall up. Like, yes you are my mom and I love you, but I don't know you."

This is an emotional and psychological challenge that many American youth are not faced with, and later in life it often resulted in visible effects on the psyche of these individuals often in the form of a grounding self-reliance and "thick skin," or a deflated and apathetic outlook on life.

"I Feel Like I Technically Raised Myself"

The divergency of experiences during the transition to adulthood (and much of childhood and adolescence) between working and lower-middle class youth and middle to upper-middle class youth was undeniable in our sample. It was very clear that the higher one's socioeconomic status, the smoother and more cushioned one's transition was. A common theme among working and lower-middle class youth was what has been identified in the literature as "accelerated adulthood," in which youth take on adult responsibilities or commitments *early* due to lack of alternatives or insufficient resources (Lee 2014). Many youth in our sample described having to take on the role of being their own parent (and/or parenting younger siblings) or having to take care of their own parents. Hallie, the working-class young woman depicted earlier, described how she became an adult very early in life after her father died:

"*I mean I had a childhood, obviously, when I was* little *little. But I didn't have, like, a teen-hood. Or whatever you call that. Like I lost my virginity when I was fourteen, and then from then on, like, you know—it was just like, you're an adult, you're—start working. […] I used to work during the summers, very early, probably right when my dad passed away when I was twelve. Um, I'd work the*

entire summers where my mom works, and uh, I would, like, make cash that way. And then, I think when I was fifteen I started lying about my age, and, like, got side jobs and stuff. So I've been working since forever.

A key component of an accelerated adulthood is that it is not adopted willingly, and it often results in a "stunting" of development later in life when they realize that they did not have the chance to develop their own interests, talents, and goals like most of their peers. While Hallie believed that she went straight into adulthood at twelve, she did not identify as an adult now at twenty-six. When Hallie was thirteen and taking care of responsibilities that no other thirteen-year-old had to manage, she felt as though she was an adult. However, now in her late twenties, she is still in school and is not where she thought she would be at this age. Therefore, she does not feel like an adult in many ways.

Another woman—twenty-two, biracial (white, black, native indigenous), and working class—explained how her experience growing up with Jehovah's Witness parents influenced her life growing up: *"I mean there have been a lot of, like, terrible things that have happened with [the religion] but I'm also kind of glad that I was raised in it, because I was—I was forced to grow up very quickly, and so a lot of things that were concerns to people that I went to middle school or high school with, I was not at all thinking about that."* Looking back at this, however, and despite the fact that she was still living with her parents and struggled with depression and anxiety because of it, she was *glad* that she experienced the things she had.

"I Didn't Have Any Help. Like, I Put Myself Out There."

Another facet of working and lower-middle class youth's transition to adulthood was a lack of guidance and support from parents or school administrators, which often went hand in hand with an accelerated transition to adulthood as they often had to take on the role of guiding and in a sense parenting themselves from an early age; this is something that middle and upper-middle class youth very rarely reported. For example, Sherline, a twenty-two year old, working class, Haitian woman that we discussed earlier, described how she had to rely on herself for motivation and goals due to her parents' lack of investment:

"If it was up to my parents and them paying attention to how I did in school, then I could've been, like, lazy and it wouldn't even matter to them. Like I felt like – because I saw that I didn't… I wanted better for myself. And they always talk about school is the key to a better life so I'm like, if school is the key to a better life then I need to do well if I want to leave my parents' house, if I want to have my own place or get a good job like society always talks. Or you need this degree to make this amount of money. So that was my motivation. I motivated myself to be like, I'm going to do this for myself so I can be out of here or better."

This type of experience was so common in our sample, it is questionable whether we can say that these youth's transitional period is equivalent or even akin to middle and upper-middle class youth. For youth who have strong support systems and the economic, social, and cultural capital to successfully navigate the increasingly individualized transition to adulthood, they enter the competition for schools, jobs, and resources at a significant advantage.

"I Think I Grew A Tough Skin."

Looking back on the challenging experienced they had faced while growing up, working and lower-middle class youth often saw their upbringing as beneficial in that it helped them become a stronger or more "realistic" person. One twenty year old, Hispanic, working-class woman explained this very concisely when she said, *"I don't think it was negative because I'm a stronger person now that I've been through all of that."* Many of these youth recounted narratives of personal struggles and painful experiences, and framed their identity in a context of emotional suffering. This is articulated again by a twenty-two year old, biracial (white, black, native indigenous), working class woman when she explained how her experience growing up with Jehovah's Witness parents influenced her life:

> *"I mean there have been a lot of, like, terrible things that have happened with [the religion] but I'm also kind of glad that I was raised in it […]because I kind of have a more realistic view of what I'm getting myself into or what I'm doing. And uh, I think it just kind of helped me, like, just look at things not so much from—just from a realistic standpoint. And I can approach situations differently, so."* Mhm. *"I think in that sense it's good that I was raised in that. But uh, I mean everything else kind of sucked, but it gets better. It'll get better."*

By overcoming their painful experiences and suffering through hardships, they often saw these experiences as positive (or at least not inherently negative) because it allowed them to develop a thick skin and to stand up for themselves. More often than not, however, these young people did not exhibit promising signs that these hardships would pay off in the long run. The difficulty of figuring out what life path to follow, financial strains on actually pursuing that path, and the burden of coping with depression and anxiety make success seem much less likely.

Despite their optimism, signs of doubt clearly emerged in several interviews. Faith in a successful future often seemed to be a front that participants put up, either for us or for themselves. Either way, it was a very fragile optimism that was often coupled with a sense of sadness or resentment. For example, one twenty year old, Hispanic, working class woman explained how she does worry about her future and whether her hard work will pay off:

> "*I don't know how … I don't know how to explain it but sometimes I'm like … I'm going to be like a – on food stamps, you know what I'm saying? This is all for nothing. Like I want a house and a family and like a nice like, comfortable living, and I'm like – I'm not going to be able to get there. […] Even though they're pretty like pretty normal goals that I'm sure a lot of people have – to just live comfortably and have a nice life – I kind of like, sometimes doubt that. But I mean I know I can do it I'm just very, very hard on myself."*

In these cases, what participants described as a "tough skin" appeared to be more of a hardening of self against further disappointment and suffering. Not all youth who had experienced troubling childhoods developed this withdrawn outlook, of course, and some appeared to be on paths that would likely lead to success and upward mobility. However, these cases were rare.

"It's Kind Of Like A Plane Crashing"

When asked to describe their definition and/or experience transitioning to adulthood, much of the responses contained stories of conflict, hardship, and anxiety. Lack of preparation

for the responsibilities and tasks they would need to accomplish were also mentioned with great frequency. One twenty year old, working class, Hispanic woman stated:

> *I definitely think they need to bring back the life courses like you know? Like where the teacher taught you about credit cards and taxes. I remember I had one like in middle school but in middle school like I don't think they should have it in middle school. I think they should have it in high school. Literally didn't know … I still don't know how to register to vote does that make sense? I don't know, I, credit card stuff, taxes, all of the things you need to get an apartment like there's a lot that I guess is different. Like if I were more, like, if my family was more involved because maybe but like, it's different. I don't really know how to explain it like. There's a lot that you should be taught before you're put into the situation.*

Middle and upper-middle class youth did not express these feelings of lack of guidance or preparation. Some scholars have argued that the job of advisors and guidance counselors has largely been relegated to parents, leaving youth whose parents do not have the time or knowledge to pass down such information at a loss.

Adulthood was also described quire frequently as a "pain in the ass," a "rollercoaster," or "scary." For example, a twenty three year old, white, working class young woman described adulthood as a "stressful, emotional, rollercoaster ride that I would never want to take back. Like, I would never take it back. I would never change it but it was just that rollercoaster ride of emotions." This young woman also explained that she had to be her own mother's parent while she was growing up. Her mother would often use drugs in front of her, and she explained that she has had to call 911 on her mother before. She would frequently attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with her mother, so she did not spend much of her time with kids her own age. The fact that she would not take back her experience illustrates yet again the sense of pride in one's hardships and difficult life experiences.

<u>"I Don't Think It's A Clear Line In The Sand."</u>

Descriptions of qualities or characteristics that made someone an adult were often hard to articulate for our participants, and we received some very ambiguous responses. When asked whether they considered themselves adults, the vast majority of respondents identified as "somewhat" or "young" adults, with very few stating that they were clearly one or the other.

A nineteen year old, white, upper-middle class man stated, for example, *"I don't think it's a clear line in the sand. It's not at some point you cross directly into adulthood. I think it's more of an evolution. I think you slowly become an adult over time and just having more experiences and more knowledge of the world and how it works."* However, distinct patterns did emerge. A twenty year old, Hispanic, working class woman described how she still felt like she was not fully an adult yet and why:

> *I cry too much. I feel like adults don't. I mean I'm sure they cry but I just feel like – I'm still like very—I feel like adults are more like secure about themselves and I'm a little insecure about my capabilities and stuff. So like, I'm like, sometimes I'm an adult and sometimes I'm not.* And so what characteristics are most important into being defined as an adult? *Definitely independent.*

Independence was overwhelmingly the most cited characteristic that defines adults. One twenty two year old, Haitian, working class woman stated, *"I think independence. Having like… being able to support yourself. Not having to dependent on your parents or not having to depend on anyone is like one quality of independent-hood, adulthood, that I would say."* Here, "independent-hood" is used interchangeably with adulthood.

This importance of being independent was present across a wide range of demographics, although it did sometimes vary in how it was described. Working class youth were more likely, for example, to focus on not having to struggle or worry about money in their definitions of adulthood. A twenty three year old, white, working class young woman explained adulthood largely in terms of traditional role transitions:

> *"For me, like getting married, being stable, buying a house, having kids, like that for me is like what adulthood is. Working at a good job, getting a degree, that's adulthood.* Mhm. And when you say stable, what do you mean? *"I can pay my monthly bills and not have to scramble to savings. Right it's not month to month basis. I know I'll be able to pay that and it will be okay. Like stable type of thing."*

Middle class youth, in contrast, tended to emphasize the process of learning how to understand the world and be a well-functioning, independent person. A twenty one year old, lower-middle-class, white woman described adulthood as *learning how to take care of yourself, like, by yourself."* She also described how learning to live on your own is a learning process where you figure out how to effectively manage your life:

> *"When you're living with your parents it's a whole different story. You're like, oh I could totally live on my own, I know how to cook spaghetti and do my laundry. But then you're on your own and you're like, I don't know how to manage my finances so that I can make rent, buy food, and, like, have fun. Like the first month that I lived on my own, I tried to go visit my friend in the keys who lives there, and I almost didn't make rent that next month because of the trip. I think being considered an adult is just when you've reached that point, like or you are in that learning process, how to like manage your own life like that on your own."*

Given the extent to which Americans value independence, autonomy, and self-reliance, it is not surprising that participants associated these characteristics so strongly with adulthood. The dominant conception of adulthood that exists today—a fully autonomous, independent, and self-determining person—is largely regarded as legitimate and accessible across the board. However, while these youth seem to subscribe to very similar conceptions of adulthood, one's ability to achieve independence is highly influenced by gender, ethnicity, nationality, and class. Whether or not these youth actually reach their goals five to ten years down the road is something we hope to explore.

When asked whether they considered themselves adults, the vast majority of respondents identified as "somewhat" or "young" adults, with very few stating that they were clearly one or the other. However, whereas Arnett describes the transition to adulthood as being achieved subjectively, as "a judgment that individuals make largely for themselves rather than one that is conferred upon them by others" (Arnett 1997:15). While individuals may be granted more power to determine their own status in contemporary society, to say that any status is achieved

independently of the opinions or influence of others is profoundly unreasonable. When one participant, for example, explained how she learned what it meant to be adult:

> *"People, society, and seeing how other adults… following other people who are older than you, seeing how they are and then you realize… okay, they are an adult. And maybe I need to mimic their behavior, because they seem to have their life under control compared to, like, my friends who are, like, in the same situation as me where life is still a little bit out of control."*

Sociologists understand well that identity and status are not something that is simply decided by the individual independently of others, but that it is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and society (Goffman 1959; King 2013; Mead 1967). Young people learn the characteristics associated with being an adult, how to judge one another in regards to whether or not someone is an adult, and how to construct their adult identities through social interactions. For adulthood to be contingent upon recognition by others, this means that being an adult is a unification between self-identifications and social affirmation—not an individual decision.

DISCUSSION

In terms of our working class and some of our lower-middle class sample, our data clearly coincide with Silva's (2013) argument that the life experiences and resources available to working-class youth dramatically influence the transition to adulthood. Working-class youth often have parents who are unable to support them, and have to take on adult-like roles such as working, taking care of siblings or parents, and charting their own life courses with little guidance or mentorship beginning at an early age. These youth often do not experience a period of "emerging adulthood," but instead are entrenched in extreme insecurity, distrust, isolation, and vulnerability. However, while Silva argues that the desire for stability has been replaced by self-interest and personal fulfillment for disadvantaged youth, we did not find this to be the case. In fact, the working-class youth in our sample were much more focused on attaining stability and security in the future, often because of their own experiences of financial instability in childhood and adolescence. This may be due to the fact that the majority of our sample was composed of college students, so this is something that should be further explored in the future.

As for the middle and upper-middle class youth, there were certainly elements of what Arnett has described as "emerging adulthood." Overall, middle and upper-middle class youth tended to experience each of the five characteristics of emerging adulthood, to varying degrees. However, one of the main issues with the emerging adulthood concept is that the vagueness of these determinants and the focus on psychological traits masks the objective reality that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the same resources necessary to complete these identity achievements. Emerging adulthood is described as a time that is unrestrained by "social roles" and "normative expectations" (Arnett 2000). However, Arnett also admits that being able to "use" emerging adulthood as such is limited by structural and cultural influences (Arnett 2000), and that "social class is unquestionably an important element" (Arnett 2016:233) in the transition to adulthood and that the middle class or above have a greater opportunity to explore potential life directions during emerging adulthood (Arnett 2007). The question then becomes, if middle and upper middle class youth are more likely to experience the characteristics of emerging adulthood, can it be said that disadvantaged youth experience a stage of emerging adulthood if they do not exhibit any of the characteristics? What is emerging adulthood without any of the characteristics that comprise it?

CONCLUSION

The concept of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are culturally and socially constructed, differing by one's class, geographical region, and historical period. In order to transition to adulthood successfully in contemporary society, youth must do a great deal of identity work along the way—something that previous generations did not engage in. However, the ability to engage in identity work requires time, resources, and cultural knowledge that are not equally distributed across lines of class, race, gender, and region. The determining factor for most of my participants in regards to whether they have reached adulthood was independence (especially from parents) and being in a position to provide for oneself without help from anyone else. While this definition did not significantly vary across social class, race, or gender, the ability to achieve independence was clearly influenced by these factors. Following up with participants will give us a better sense of whether or not these youth were able to achieve the goals that they had hoped to.

In one of his more recent publications, in which he addresses the issue of whether or not emerging adulthood applies across social classes, Arnett concludes that emerging adulthood can be understood as one stage with many paths. Youth across social classes have enough in common, he argues, to use the emerging adulthood life stage as a "heuristic" for understanding young people's transition to adulthood. However, his very definition of this "life stage" called emerging adulthood shows that he does not understand what the transformation of America's economic structure—which *caused* this change in the process of reaching adulthood—means for today's youth. He tweaks his definition of emerging adulthood by removing the psychological factors that he had developed in earlier publications and simplifying the requirements. The new definition states that "emerging adulthood can be considered to exist wherever there is a period of at least several years between the end of adolescence—meaning the attainment of physical and sexual maturity and the completion of secondary school—and the entry into stable adult roles in love and work" (Arnett 2016:234).

The crucial problem with this statement is his assumption that young people are on their way to full-time, livable, stable jobs, which overlooks the very foundation of the changing nature of adulthood. It is not that youth are simply taking longer to transition to the same adulthood that their parents and grandparents experienced, but that they are living in a society that is undergoing significant change. It is likely that young people are experiencing the effects of what Bauman (2001) and others call "late modernity" most significantly because they are at the point in their lives when they are at a precipice in which they are told that they have to figure out what to do with their lives and somehow make a living. These changes, however, are not being felt exclusively among young people but are among the wider majority.

In a society where adulthood corresponds to achievement of full personhood (Blatterer 2007), in which one supposedly attains autonomy and self-determination (Côté 2000), those who fall outside the category of "adult" are subordinated to those who are full adults. The concept of adulthood, how it is defined, and when and if it is recognized is therefore an issue of power, status, and privilege. Youth who do not have adequate resources or knowledge—such as financial, social, and cultural capital—that would allow them to achieve "ideal adulthood" are less able to gain recognition as adults, and thus full persons, and struggle to achieve a meaningful sense of identity and purpose in contemporary societies. Reaching "ideal" adulthood, like any achievement, is not an individual accomplishment. Young people rely on family, friends,

institutions, and ideologies to guide them along particular paths. Despite this reality, many of our participants—and scholars such as Arnett—emphasize the personal choices and psychological processes of individuals without contextualizing their lives in socioeconomic and political realities.

The youth who participated in this study were remarkably candid with us. Some admitted that they were sharing stories with us that they did not even tell the people who were closest to them. Numerous participants described the interviews as "therapy," and even asked us for advice about academic or social aspects of their lives. Many spoke about experiences that they rarely, if ever, talk about, and tears were often shed during interviews. One woman, a twenty two year old, working class, Haitian woman told one of our research assistants,

> *"I've never really have had to sit down and talk about myself like this, so... it's like, it made me think, like, wow, like, I've gone through a lot and, like, my life has really changed, and the way I, like—like, the way I thought about my life has really changed also so… It felt good to get everything out because I've never been to therapy before. So having someone, just, a complete—someone who don't know anything about my life— you know, if you were my friend, I probably would've been more reserved to tell you these things because if you were my friend and I don't want you to know every specific detail, but the fact that you're a stranger and you don't know anything about me—I'm just pouring it out."*

We are grateful to the people who were willing to share their stories with us, and hope that by the act of speaking about their backgrounds and considering questions that they might not have otherwise asked themselves has contributed to their understanding of themselves.

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